

## Sandy Hook Elementary School Shooting

A school shooting is a terrible and traumatic event for parents, students, and the community as a whole. The violence that struck the staff and students of Sandy Hook Elementary School has stunned the nation and is a grim reminder that violent acts can strike in the most unexpected places and can endanger even the youngest lives.

The resources collected in this newsletter are specifically focused on helping younger members of your family cope with what has happened. From recommendations for how to address very serious topics with children to providing support for a child affected by violence or upset by the images broadcast over the television, these articles help to create a foundation for care and recovery.

## Talking to Your Children About the Recent Spate of School Shootings



Few events hit home for children and families like a school shooting. When children see such an event on television or on Web-based news flashes, it is natural for them to worry about their own school and their own safety, particularly if the violence occurred nearby or in a neighboring city or state.

### **Talk to your children**

Psychologists who work in the area of trauma and recovery advise parents to use the troubling news of school shootings as an opportunity to talk and listen to their children. It is important, say these

psychologists, to be honest. Parents should acknowledge to children that bad things do happen, but also reassure them with the information that many people are working to keep them safe, including their parents, teachers, and local police.

Young children may communicate their fears through play or drawings. Elementary school children will use a combination of play and talking to express themselves. Adolescents are more likely to have the skills to communicate their feelings and fears verbally. Adults should be attentive to children's concerns, but also try to help children put their fears into proportion to the real risk. Again, it is important to reassure children that the adults in their lives are doing everything they can to make their environment—school, home, and neighborhood—safe for them.

Parents, teachers, and school administrators also need to communicate with one another not only about how to keep kids safe, but about which children might need more reassurance and the best way to give it to them.

### **Limit exposure to news coverage**

Parents should also monitor how much exposure a child has to news reports of traumatic events, including these recent school shootings. Research has shown that some young children believe that the events are reoccurring each time they see a television replay of the news footage.

### **Know the warning signs**

Most children are quite resilient and will return to their normal activities and personality relatively quickly, but parents should be alert to any signs of anxiety that might suggest that a child or teenager might need more assistance. Such

indicators could be a change in the child's school performance, changes in relationships with peers and teachers, excessive worry, school refusal, sleeplessness, nightmares, headaches or stomachaches, or loss of interest in activities that the child used to enjoy. Also remember that every child will respond to trauma differently. Some will have no ill effects; others may suffer an immediate and acute effect. Still others may not show signs of stress until sometime after the event.

For more information, go to the [APA Help Center](#).

*American Psychological Association*

## Helping Your Children Manage Distress in the Aftermath of a Shooting

As a parent, you may be struggling with how to talk with your children about a shooting rampage. It is important to remember that children look to their parents to make them feel safe. This is true no matter what age your children are, be they toddlers, adolescents, or even young adults.

### Consider the following tips for helping your children manage their distress.

**Talk with your child.** Talking to your children about their worries and concerns is the first step to help them feel safe and begin to cope with the events occurring around them. What you talk about and how you say it does depend on their age, but all children need to be able to know you are there listening to them.

- Find times when they are most likely to talk: such as when riding in the car, before dinner, or at bedtime.
- Start the conversation; let them know you are interested in them and how they are coping with the information they are getting.
- Listen to their thoughts and point of view; don't interrupt--allow them to express their ideas and understanding before you respond.
- Express your own opinions and ideas without putting down theirs; acknowledge that it is okay to disagree.
- Remind them you are there for them to provide safety, comfort, and support. Give them a hug.

**Keep home a safe place.** Children, regardless of age, often find home to be a safe haven when the world around them becomes overwhelming. During times of crisis, it is important to remember that your children may come home seeking the safe feeling they have being there. Help make it a place where your children find the solitude or comfort they need. Plan a night where everyone participates in a favorite family activity.

**Watch for signs of stress, fear, or anxiety.** After a traumatic event, it is typical for children (and adults) to experience a wide range of emotions, including fearfulness, shock, anger, grief, and anxiety. Your children's behaviors may change because of their response to the event. They may experience trouble sleeping, difficulty with concentrating on school work, or changes in appetite. This is normal for everyone and should begin to disappear in a few months. Encourage your children to put their feelings into words by talking about them or journaling. Some children may find it helpful to express their feelings through art.

**Take "news breaks."** Your children may want to keep informed by gathering information about the event from the internet, television, or newspapers. It is important to limit the amount of time spent watching the news because constant exposure may actually heighten their anxiety and fears. Also, scheduling some breaks for yourself is important; allow yourself time to engage in activities you enjoy.

**Take care of yourself.** Take care of yourself so you can take care of your children. Be a model for your children on how to manage traumatic events. Keep regular schedules for activities such as family meals and exercise to help restore a sense of security and normalcy.

These tips and strategies can help you guide your children through the current crisis. If you are feeling stuck or overwhelmed, you may want to consider talking to someone who could help. A licensed mental health professional such as a psychologist can assist you in developing an appropriate strategy for moving forward. It is important to get professional help if you feel like you are unable to function or perform basic activities of daily living.

## Tips for Talking to Children in Trauma

Children are just as affected as adults are by a disaster or traumatic event. Some may be affected even more, but no one realizes it. Without intending to, we, as parents, may send our children a message that it is not all right to talk about the experience. This may cause confusion, self-doubt, and feelings of helplessness for a child. Children need to hear that it is normal to feel frightened during and after a disaster or traumatic event. When you acknowledge and normalize these feelings for your children, it will help them cope with their experience and move on.

Following exposure to a disaster or traumatic event, children are likely to show signs of stress. Signs include sadness and anxiety, outbursts and tantrums, aggressive behavior, a return to earlier behavior that was outgrown, stomachaches and headaches, and an ongoing desire to stay home from school or away from friends. These reactions are normal and usually do not last long. Whether your child is a preschooler, adolescent, or somewhere in between, you can help your child by following the suggestions below.

### Preschooler

- Stick to regular family routines.
- Make an extra effort to provide comfort and reassurance.
- Avoid unnecessary separations.
- Permit a child to sleep in the parents' room temporarily.
- Encourage expression of feelings and emotions through play, drawing, puppet shows, and storytelling.
- Limit media exposure.
- Develop a safety plan for future incidents.

### Elementary-Age Children

- Provide extra attention and consideration.
- Set gentle but firm limits for acting out behavior.
- Listen to a child's repeated telling of his/her trauma experience.
- Encourage expression of thoughts and feelings through conversation and play.
- Provide home chores and rehabilitation activities that are structured, but not too demanding.
- Rehearse safety measures for future incidents.
- Point out kind deeds and the ways in which people helped each other during the disaster or traumatic event.

### Preadolescents and Adolescents

- Provide extra attention and consideration.
- Be there to listen to your children, but don't force them to talk about feelings and emotions.
- Encourage discussion of trauma experiences among peers.
- Promote involvement with community recovery work.
- Urge participation in physical activities.
- Encourage resumption of regular social and recreational activities.
- Rehearse family safety measures for future incidents.

It is important to remember that you do not have to "fix" how your child feels. Instead, focus on helping your child understand and deal with his or her experiences. Healing is an evolving state for most children, but some may need professional help.

If signs of stress do not subside after a few weeks, or if they get worse, consider consulting a mental health professional who has special training in working with children. In time, and with help, your children will return to health.

## Additional Resource

As an additional resource to assist you with helping your child(ren) understand, cope with, and recover from the Sandy Hook Elementary School shooting, here's a parent's guide produced by the National Institutes of Mental Health. Use this information to determine the right steps and strategies for attentive care that will help younger family members in need.

[Helping Children and Adolescents Cope with Violence and Disasters](#)

*The National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH)*

**24/7 confidential member counseling, information and help is available at 1-800-252-4555 or 1-800-225-2527**